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ABSTRACT

A review of South Korean elementary school textbooks and teacher's guides suggests three characteristic aspects of language and literacy education, including: (1) that two new language styles are appearing in textbooks, distinguishing the educated from the uneducated in everyday life, and that children learn formal speech style in the first grade and writing style in the third grade; (2) that while the Hangul alphabet is taught and used exclusively in the elementary school, it is mixed with Hanmun characters in society; and (3) two definitions of the paragraph appear in textbooks: one is the same definition used in the English-speaking world, the other a traditional one defining the paragraph as a unit of meaning forming one of several parts of a chapter or story. The policy of encouraging the exclusive use of Hangul and discouraging Hanmun characters use at school is expected to produce generations free from inappropriate concepts of the unit of language and locus of meaning advocated by Hanmun users. The two new language styles will help children become familiarized with both traditional, as well as new writing styles in Korea. These trends are seen as providing children with the ability to survive in a traditional society and building a generation that is part of the world society. (Author/MSE)

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Elementary Language Education in South Korea

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〈Abstract〉

The elementary school textbooks and teacher's guides were examined and three points that characterized the schooling language and literacy education were identified.

First, two new styles appeared in the textbooks. Children were to begin to learn the formal speech style in the first grade and the written language in the third grade. The two styles distinguish the educated from the uneducated in everyday life in society, which forms part of the distinctive cultural background of the people in comparison with those who speak a language which does not have a variety of language styles that indicate degrees of respect.

Second, the Hanmun characters, Chinese ideographic script, have been used mixed with Hangul alphabet, the Korean system of phonetic signs, in the society. However, Hangul alphabet is exclusively taught and used at the elementary school. This policy of encouraging the exclusive use of Hangul and discouraging the learning and use of Hanmun characters at school is expected to

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produce Hangul generations who are free from the inappropriate concepts of the unit of language and the locus of meaning advocated by many Hanmun users.

Third, two definitions of the paragraph appeared in the textbooks. One was the same definition available in the English speaking world. The other was traditional one which defined the paragraph, or moondahn, as a unit of meaning that formed one of several parts of a chapter or story. Indentation did not always indicate that a moondahn began there. In writing, children were to learn how to organize the paragraph in the same sense available in the English speaking world. The employment of the dual definition of the paragraph will help children get familiar both with the traditional style of writing and the new style of written texts currently available in Korea.

The schooling language and literacy education at the elementary school in South Korea seems likely to produce young Koreans in possession of two distinct abilities. First, they will have the power to survive in a traditional society. Second, they will also be able to contribute uniquely and effectively to the building of a new generation that will constitute a small portion of the whole population of the world which is getting smaller and smaller every day.

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Elementary Language Education in Korea

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Introduction

Koreans are mono-lingual. The Korean language is spoken for all communicative purposes at school or in the society. Certain Oriental and Occidental languages are taught as foreign languages at school; however, none of them is used for daily life in South Korea.

Educational development has been one of the most important targets of national development. Every one of 41 million citizens has the right for equal opportunity regardless of their religion, sex, or socio-economic status. Six years of elementary education and 3 years of middle school education are free and compulsory. As of 1988, approximately 99% of 6-year-old children go to the elementary school, almost 99% of the elementary school graduates go to the middle school for 3 years, and approximately 92% of the middle school graduates go to the high school for 3 years (Ministry of Education, 1988). For higher education, South Korea has 468 junior colleges, universities, and graduate schools.

Within this total context of education, we will think about some interesting facts about schooling language and literacy education at the elementary school. The focus will be placed on the educational effects upon the children's future life of communication.

The elementary school textbooks and teacher's guides were examined and three points were picked up for the organization of this paper. First, two new styles of schooling language appear in the textbooks. One is a public speech style. It does not sound like any one of the speech styles a child may have acquired at home. The other is the written language. Second, Hangul alphabet, a system of phonetic signs, is exclusively taught and used. Korea borrowed Chinese ideographic script, or Hanmun, a long time ago. The Hanmun characters have been used mixed with Hangul alphabet in the society; however, not a single Hanmun character appears in the current textbooks. Third, two different definitions of the paragraph are supposed to be taught. One is the same definition available in the English speaking world. The other is a traditional one which is apparently different from the first one. These three seem to characterize the schooling language and literacy education at the elementary school.

I will talk about each one of them in detail. We will think about the educational effects upon the children's future life of communication.

Two New Styles of Language

Content words in Korean are combined into a sentence chiefly by means of agglutination of suffixes. The suffixes indicate the cases of the content words. For example, let's think of a robot watching TV. In English,

"A robot watches TV"; in Korean, "han robotka TVrul boayo." These ka and rul attached to the content words 'robot' and 'TV' are two examples of suffixes. The suffix ka in robotka is a nominative case indicator; the suffix rul in TVrul is an accusative case indicator. In the example, "han robotka TVrul boayo", the first word han is the Korean equivalent of the English article 'a' and the last word boayo is the verb. (No capital letter system is used in Korean.)

The use of suffixes for case indication allows the language some flexibility in its word order. According to a given situational or textual context, either the subject or the object can be deleted, and the order of Subject + Object can be reversed into that of Object + Subject. This and other re-ordering of syntactic elements is done by textual rules (Kim, B.W., 1983a, 1983b, 1988). However, the flexibility of word order does not apply to the verb. The verb always comes at the end and finalizes the sentence by indicating degrees of respect of the speaker toward the listener.

The verb ending yo plays the role of showing the speaker's recognition of the listener's seniority or superiority. In the sentence, "han robotka TVrul boayo", the yo in the verb boayo indicates that the speaker is talking to his senior or superior. The verb boa without the honorific yo is used when one talks with juniors or inferiors or friends. So, if you want to make sure whether a Korean respects you or not, you may prompt him to speak a sentence in Korean and see whether he finalizes it with yo or not. Another common honorific ending is nida, which will be introduced later on.

These two common styles and others constitute a variety of speech styles available in the society. Korean children naturally acquire one or more of them at home before they go to school. Some begin to use the yo style appropriately when they are two years old (Lee, 1986).

The school is the place where children formally learn the public speech

style and the written language. The two styles have one thing in common; i.e., the speaker and the writer are supposed to speak or write to the public. They are not engaged in a person-to-person communication; actually or in their imagination, they talk to the public. The school provides these two language styles to the children. In the classroom many teachers employ the public speech style when they talk to the children, and the textbooks are printed either in the public speech style or in the written language style.

Sentences in the styles of public speech and written language are finalized with the endings of -nida and -da respectively. The teacher usually says, "han robotka TVrul bomnida," with the verb bomnida that is finalized with nida, the public speech ending. The textbook usually reads: "han robotka TVrul bonda", with the verb bonda that is finalized with da, the written language ending, instead of nida or yo. One may use the ending of the public speech style, nida, to express a very high degree of respect in a personal communication. In fact, the ending nida is commonly used as a higher honorific than the ending yo which was formerly introduced. Also, one may use the written language style, da, to one's juniors or inferiors in a public speech.

The formal public speech style is employed in the first and second grade textbooks. All the sentences including directions are finalized by the nida ending. From among the 13 third grade textbooks, ten employ the public speech style. But one textbook uses the written language style and two mix the two styles, where the directions are written in the formal public speech style and the others are printed in the written language style. So the children begin to learn the formal public speech style in the first grade, and begin to get an access to the written language style in the third grade.

The written language style dominates the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade textbooks. Six out of 9 textbooks employ the written language style, two employ the formal public speech style, and one mixes the two styles. The

students will begin to get very familiar with the written language style at the fourth grade.

In fact, the formal public speech style and the written language style apparently distinguish the educated from the uneducated in everyday communication in Korean society. Also, they form part of the distinctive cultural background of the people in comparison with those who speak a language which does not have a variety of styles that indicate degrees of respect.

Exclusive Use of Hangul

It is generally assumed that the earliest introduction of Hanmun, the Chinese ideograph, was about 108 B.C., and some evidence shows that scholarly people began to use Hanmun characters very well by the fourth or fifth century (Nam, P.H., 1982; Kim, C.W., 1983; Pihl, 1983).

However, Hanmun cannot be a natural way of visualizing the Korean language because Hanmun characters have their own fixed meanings and pronunciations which have nothing to do with their Korean counterparts. The Chinese language is essentially different from Korean. Nevertheless, Koreans tried to use Hanmun characters with their original meanings and pronunciations to represent their thoughts and feelings, partly because they did not have their own way of visualizing spoken Korean and partly because they wanted to learn Chinese culture and thoughts, specifically, Confucian philosophy (Nam, P.H., 1982).

Thanks to Hanmun characters, leaders and scholars in the old days were able to enjoy literate life. Besides, their learning and teaching of Hanmun characters eventually enriched their knowledge of the prescriptive philosophy of Confucian culture.

In contrast to this bright side of the effects, we can hardly overlook certain negative effects. First, there are too many characters to learn. The number of Chinese characters may be estimated at 80,000. To be literate in Hanmun characters, by definition, one is supposed to master a considerable portion of the 80,000 characters, which is undoubtedly a formidable task for ordinary people.

Second, reading comprehension of Hanmun characters means to "collect" the fixed meanings of the characters. The individual character is the unit of meaning and the meaning "resides" in the script. These incorrect ideas of the unit of language and the locus of meaning appear to be shared by many Koreans, including some professors and school teachers. We can hardly expect them to teach the students appropriately how to read and comprehend better.

Third, the unrealistic concepts of the unit of language and the locus of meaning are liable to lead the people to form an unrealistic idea of the writing process as well as the reading process. To them, the writing process may appear so simplistic that all one should do to improve writing may appear to be no more than learning as many ideographs as possible because fixed meanings reside in the characters. They may totally neglect teaching how to think better for a better practice of writing.

Hangul alphabet was invented by King Sejong and his scholars in 1443. Hangul is a simple and effective system of phonetic signs. Since then many Koreans have had to struggle for the use of Hangul in place of Hanmun characters.

Today, literary works for general readers, especially novels, are printed in Hangul exclusively, and many of the pages of the daily newspapers and non-professional journals are printed in Hangul. Some newspapers use only Hangul. Nevertheless, some college professors use Hanmun characters as their main instructional medium. Koreans are free to use Hanmun characters

any time and anywhere they want to.

Since 1970, however, all textbooks for elementary school have used Hangul exclusively and no course for Hanmun characters is offered. In the secondary school textbooks Hanmun characters may be used in the parentheses that follow the relevant Hangul words. A total of 1,800 characters are taught in the middle and high school Hanmun courses.

The policy of literacy education established and practiced since 1945 aimed at a successful eradication of illiteracy. In 1945, 78% was known to be illiterate in reading Hangul but, in 1958, a government report disclosed that only 4.1% of those above 12 years of age appeared illiterate. No official report of illiteracy rate in reading Hanmun characters is available.

The literacy policy of encouraging the exclusive use of Hangul and discouraging the learning and use of Hanmun characters at school allows us to expect that the Hangul generations will succeed in building up a society where many people have better ideas of the reading and writing process. Many of them will be free from the inappropriate concepts of the unit of language and the locus of meaning, which will eventually free their linguistic and non-linguisitic thinking processes from being excessively controlled by the limited number of written words.

Dual Definition of the Paragraph

I once translated a Korean novel into English. It was written by a modern writer and the language style was typically Korean. I had to spend about 45 days laboring on the tedious job before I could produce 272 pages of manuscript typed in double-space. I attempted to keep the original flavor of a modern Korean novel in meaning and textuality, such as the printing

format, while producing a readable English version. I asked one of my American friends, a native speaker of English, to read the manuscript and suggest corrections for any improvements. Letty was her name. She was not a writer but she majored in education at a university and reading novels was one of her favorite activities. She was teaching English to Korean university students while staying in Seoul for a couple of years. Letty did not hesitate to help me with the work and took the manuscript with her home, and brought it back in a few days.

The corrected manuscript gave me an unexpected challenge of making an uneasy decision. Surprisingly enough, it was not because of her correction of the language itself. There were no more than a dozen improvements on English. But the problem was the indentation. In the 272 page manuscript I found that 489 sentences were marked to be conjoined with other sentences into a larger size of paragraphs. I could not make up my mind immediately whether to give up the author's original style and follow the reader's suggestions or to neglect the suggestions and keep the traditional Korean way of indentation.

This episode tells us that the definitions of the paragraph that some Korean authors have and that American readers have are not identical. The Korean equivalent of the word 'paragraph' is moondahn, and the word moondahn is translated into the English word 'paragraph'. However, the moondahn does not always mean the same thing that the paragraph does.

The traditional Korean concept of moondahn means a unit of meaning that forms one of several parts of a chapter or story. Indentation does not always indicate that a moondahn begins there. For example, 22 indentations are identified in one chapter about how to talk better in the third grade reading textbook, and the teacher's guide tells the teachers to instruct the children to "divide [the whole chapter] into two (or three, or five) large moondahns" (Ministry of Education, 1989a, 285). In other words, the author made 22

indentations that could be combined into 2 or 3 or 5 units of meaning. Each of these units is referred to as the moondahn which is usually translated into the 'paragraph' in English.

On the other hand, the word moondahn is also used to mean what the paragraph means in English. In the same textbook where the traditional Korean concept of moondahn is employed are two chapters found composed of typical paragraphs like those found in the English textbooks, and the teacher's guide instructs the teachers to teach the children how to comprehend the paragraph.

To avoid any confusion in understanding the meanings of the Korean word moondahn, which currently has a dual definition, and the meaning of the 'paragraph' in English, it is recommendable to use the word moondahn to indicate the traditional Korean way of dealing with the indentation style. By contrast, we will use the word 'paragraph' to indicate the new way of paragraphing in the sense available in the English speaking world even if in reality the Korean word moondahn is also used to mean the 'paragraph'.

In writing, the teachers are supposed to teach how to organize the paragraph in the same sense available in the English speaking world. The teacher's guide of the fifth grade language textbook tells the teachers to help the children write better by teaching the following (Ministry of Education, 1989b, 102-103, 136-137):

(1) The paragraph forms a smaller unit within the whole writing.
(2) The indentation indicates the beginning of a new paragraph.
(3) The paragraph shows the beginning of a new unit of meaning in the text.
(4) It is composed of a key sentence and some supporting details.
(5) It may have the key sentence at the beginning or at the end.
(6) The main idea is explained by the supporting ideas.
(7) The children should learn that a different concept of paragraph is applied to some types of writing.

A brief explanation of the dual definition of moondahn discloses that Korean children learn to read texts written in two different styles. On the one hand, sufficient practice in forming the moondahn is expected to help the children read Korean texts written in the traditional style of indentation. On the other hand, some practice in reading articles textualized according to the new definition of the paragraph will help them become familiar with texts written in the new style of indentation.

Besides, some practice in organizing the paragraph is expected to help them gain a better knowledge of the paragraph and better skills in writing texts by extending and expanding each main idea into a fully developed paragraph. The employment of the dual definition of moondahn in the elementary school curriculum seems to imply that the children are supposed to be familiar both with the traditional style and the new style of written texts currently available in Korea.

Conclusion

An examination of the textbooks and teacher's guides in terms of the three points, i.e., two new styles of language, exclusive use of Hangul, and the dual definition of the paragraph, seems to lead us to a conclusion that language and literacy education at the elementary school level is expected to produce young Koreans in possession of two distinct abilities. Firstly, they will have the power to survive in a traditional society. Secondly, they will also be able to contribute uniquely and effectively to the building of a new generation that will constitute a small portion of the whole population of the world which is getting smaller and smaller every day.

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